

Burnt Hills United Methodist Church

A Plan for Discipleship



**Prepared by the Discipleship Plan Team
for Church Council
Revised - March 2022**

Makeup of the Discipleship Plan Team was fluid over time
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The team also recognizes those who attended several rounds of
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While these additional individuals were not part of the Discipleship Plan
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BHUMC Discipleship Plan

Introduction

Mission

“The United Methodist Church seeks to “Make Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World”. In alignment with this mission, UMC congregations in the Upper New York Annual Conference have been asked to construct a Discipleship Plan to guide our ministries and activities. To this end, a BHUMC team has been undertaking discernment, exploration, and reflection with the goal of creating a living statement regarding discipleship at BHUMC.

At the heart of our response to this call is our communal definition of **discipleship:**

Discipleship is a shared way of living wherein followers of Christ grow spiritually together, go into the world to reflect God's love through our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. Disciples also welcome others into the community of faith to share these experiences.

As a congregation, we share a faith in God through Jesus Christ. Through that faith, we believe that God loves each person, and desires to be in relationship with each person. God sent his son, Jesus Christ, to live among us. In turn, we are called to commit ourselves to follow the teachings and way of life of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures contain the message of God’s love and grace to teach us, guide us, and lead us in becoming disciples and living a life in Christ. Additionally, God has blessed each of us with unique Spiritual Gifts, which we can use and discover on our discipleship pathway.

The Discipleship Plan seeks to build a shared understanding of what being a disciple means in the faith context of this community, why it is important, and how we can grow together as followers of Jesus. It is intended for all persons who connect to BHUMC, visitors, casual attendees, regular attendees, and members alike.

Our Journey

BHUMC is a church that welcomes all, offers opportunity to grow spiritually, and sends people into the community to serve others, to live as disciples, to bear witness and to show others the power of faith in word and deed.



The **discipleship journey** that each of us takes can be viewed as starting at some point on an ever-expanding spiral, in which we continue to be **welcomed**, to learn and **grow**, and to **go** into the world to serve. The spiral represents not only a process for our growth in discipleship, but it also helps to express the idea that people may enter the spiral at different locations, experience the support of others, and move forward at their own pace.

Our **worship** experiences (in person and on-line) are a central focus of our spiritual formation, inspiration, and expression. In worship, we lift up, celebrate, pray, seek guidance, and experience the Gospel. Worship provides time to meet others, share in music, sacrament, and liturgy. All who are interested in being Disciples of Jesus are encouraged to join our worshipping community.

As disciples, we **welcome** in Christian love all who seek to know God and explore Faith. This includes sharing information about opportunities to participate. We expect to extend, and receive, a continuing welcome as we journey together.

Growth in discipleship can happen in many ways. For some it is by participation in worship, for others it is by attending small groups for education and fellowship. Still others may grow by exploring their Spiritual Gifts and Spiritual Practices, or by engaging in loving service to others. To be a disciple is live our faith, in action and deed. In so doing, newcomers

have opportunity to welcome others and members can be moved to go into the community and the world to share our gifts and to serve others with God's love.

Our Plan

While we all come to church for different reasons and at different points in our discipleship journey, the plan seeks to help each of us reflect on our experience of church, engaging questions such as:

- *How is our church engagement helping us to experience and extend welcome, to grow and learn, and to be sent out in service to others?*
- *Is church a place where we pray for God's guidance and power, to use our talents to help change the world one step at a time?*
- *Do we seek Christian education to be more informed or to help others see God?*
- *Do we share our faith with others, and are we growing in faith in a way that guides our own lives?*

Our intention is to help all engage in a lifelong process of becoming Disciples of Jesus Christ, living faith-filled lives in service, and reaching out to others. We seek a shared pathway that offers principles to live by and opportunities to grow in faith. Major steps along the pathway will require the following practices to enhance our experiences:

- *Love God* – personal devotion and corporate worship
- *Love others* – faith relationships and loving service

The components of a life of discipleship include:

- *Welcome* – exploring
- *Grow* – seeking spiritual maturity
- *Send* – being in service to God's children and God's world

We hope that this plan helps each person on their discipleship journey as they explore and grow in their relationship with God and with the community here at BHUMC and beyond our doors.

Discipleship – A Faith Journey

Purpose

As Disciples of Jesus Christ, we are a people who commit ourselves to follow the teachings and way of life of Jesus Christ.

The Burnt Hills United Methodist congregation seeks to support one another in exploring and deepening our life of discipleship: **welcoming, growing, and being sent to serve.**

This Discipleship Plan document seeks to help all – visitors and members – to build a shared understanding of what being a disciple means in the faith context of this community, why it is important, and how we can grow together as followers of Jesus.

Background

Discipleship is a central commitment for United Methodists and is actually the focus of the denominational Mission Statement: *The United Methodist Church seeks to Make Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World.* That is a powerful statement, yet it leaves to each congregation to discover how to form and grow disciples in our own contexts.

A more specific description of discipleship may be found in the statement created by our Upper New York Annual Conference Leadership Team.

A Disciple of Jesus Christ is a person who:

- *Confesses faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.*
- *Is continually transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.*
- *Seeks accountability to grow spiritually and missionally.*
- *Boldly connects with the world around them while dismantling all forms of oppression and building up marginalized communities.*
- *Proclaims the Good News of Jesus Christ.*
- *Participates with God to make other disciples.*

This is a detailed description of discipleship, but perhaps too much to expect church members to remember as they seek to quickly describe what discipleship means. After prayerfully considering these, and other definitions of discipleship, a study team at BHUMC developed this statement as our own definition of discipleship:

“Discipleship is a shared way of living where followers of Christ welcome others who are curious into the community of faith: to grow spiritually together and to go into the world to reflect God's love through our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.”

This definition will inform our congregation and its leaders as we:

- Examine what current practices already support healthy discipleship growth:
- Consider what new practices may be fruitful to help the congregation reach toward fruitful discipleship; and continue to assess ways that any individual – whether currently a member or yet to visit with us – can live into their faith in ways that will allow growth in discipleship.

Visualizing Discipleship

The discipleship journey can be viewed as starting at some point on an ever-expanding spiral. The spiral represents not only a process for our potentially expanding growth in discipleship, but it also helps to express the idea that people may enter the spiral at different locations and continue at their own pace.

Someone who is new to Christianity and developing their discipleship, may be seen as starting at the very origin point of the spiral; while someone who has been a disciple for some time before coming to BHUMC, may be seen as “entering” the spiral at any place along its path. The ever expanding nature of the spiral indicates that everyone, no matter where on their own journey they may be, has the potential to explore and grow in their connection to God, and thus their discipleship.



The ever-growing potential reflects our Wesleyan understanding of “Christian Perfection” as something that we can all strive to grow toward, with God’s help, while acknowledging that Jesus himself is likely the only human to have ever attained ultimate “perfection”. When we consider “Christian Perfection,” Methodists do not mean being morally flawless or without sin, but rather a sense of spiritual maturity. John Wesley taught that since Jesus invited us to seek “perfection” in love, we should strive for it in this life, even if we do not attain it. Such perfection is not “perfectionism,” but rather is about being filled with love in response to God’s Grace. That type of love, and the continued process of seeking it, is at the heart of one’s discipleship and can be visualized using the spiral.

The Path of Our Spiritual Journey

Our church is the people who share a faith in God through Jesus Christ. Through that faith, we believe that God has blessed each of us with Spiritual Gifts which we can use on our journey through life to help shape our individual discipleship paths. Identifying which gifts each of us possess and how they may shape our Spiritual Journey’s can be helpful in our discipleship.

John Ackerman, in his book *Listening to God: Spiritual Formation in Congregations* (2001, Chapter 3: “Love Differentiates” published by Rowman and Littlefield Publishers), identifies four Spirituality Types:

- 1. Thinking (head) Spirituality: ... favors sermons, lectures and studies. Content is important, and a coherent way of thinking about God and things of the Spirit is important. They may feel intellectually challenged by good information and spend much time thinking about how it relates to God.*
- 2. Feeling (heart) Spirituality: These people want to know God with their feelings.... The presence of God is felt; there is a movement of the heart. They may tell stories of God in their lives and want others to experience the same joy and delight in God that they do.*

3. Being (mystic) Spirituality: These people... easily find God just by being with God... They may talk about listening to God or wondering at creation or delighting in another person.... They may experience God in meditation and silence.

4. Doing (kingdom) Spirituality: These ... do things for the kingdom. They have a passion for transforming society, for social justice, or for individual acts of compassion. They find God when they help, serve, do.

On our own Discipleship Path, we tend to align with one of these types. All are valid as God speaks to us in different ways and the varieties of experience and differing gifts are what builds up and enriches the body of Christ. Every disciple has their own expression of discipleship and the path we travel adds something different to the Body.

Worship

Our Worship experiences are a central focus of the Spiritual Journey for many who come to church and is often the beginning of our faith experience. It is a core feature of our religious being where we praise God for life and refresh our perspective on faith. As we worship, we become one with God, reflect on life's lessons, and seek guidance for next steps in our life. We hope that the Good News of our faith will encourage others in search of a faith understanding to join us.

Worship provides time to meet visitors, share in music, sacrament, and liturgy; and to learn from the weekly reading of scripture and messages that relate to those readings. It enables us to enhance our lives as examples of the love of Jesus Christ and prepares us to walk the path to other faith-based opportunities. All who are interested in being disciples are encouraged to join our worship community.

Welcoming

At BHUMC we see ourselves as a **Welcoming Church**. As Disciples of Christ, we greet all who come with a smile and a few friendly words to help people feel comfortable in their quest for spiritual experience.

Yet we also realize that an important aspect of welcoming is to extend that welcome and that feeling out into the community, by joining others where they are, getting acquainted, learning their needs, offering opportunities to explore their questions about faith and to seek their own Spiritual Path.

We seek to invite friends, neighbors, and co-workers to join us and to explore why they see us in action, living as disciples. Part of being welcoming, is to demonstrate what it means to be part of our community in our everyday lives and to invite others to explore that experience for themselves.

Every disciple should recognize the importance of their communications and their actions of welcome and invitation in every setting. The practice of Welcoming others to explore with us is not to create more members, nor to create more revenue, but to share in the love of Christ that we already know and provide the opportunity for others to feel invited to explore it for themselves. That Love can transform the world.

Growing

An important opportunity for each disciple is to **Grow** in that discipleship. Growth in discipleship can happen in many ways. For some it is by participation in worship, for others it is by attending small groups where fellowship or education may be the goal. Still others may grow by exploring their own Spiritual Gifts by taking a Spiritual Gifts Assessment, by exploring Spiritual Practices such as prayer, journaling, regular study of scripture, or a myriad of other ways. Growing can happen in groups or in individual ways. A wonderful example of growth was shared with us by a member of our congregation:

My grandmother passed in January at the age of 93. In her bedroom we found her extremely well-worn Bible with considerable amounts of notes scrolled in the margins. Her Daily Devotional books and a small stack of the newest Guideposts magazines were always read as she sat in her recliner chair day after day until her Dementia impaired her

mind to where she stopped reading and writing. My mother and I decided to read through some of my grandmother's journals that she had written for years and years.

What stunned me was these were no typical journals, documenting her days and thoughts. These journal entries were meant for one reason: her direct conversations with God. Each day she celebrated with and thanked God, voiced concerns and prayers to Him; that bond and communication never ceased. Each day of her life was absolutely devoted to her God, church, and family. Yes, she participated in all the events (participation in the United Methodist Women, working at church dinners, being a Sunday School teacher and Superintendent, etc.), but what was extraordinary to me was her transition from merely "doing" these things to taking them into her heart and mind to develop a fully formed personal relationship with Christ during her daily life, utilizing her strengths of writing, helping, and leading.

BHUMC offers many opportunities for Growth, in a variety of forms. Specific examples of opportunities already in place can be found in Appendix A. In addition to these opportunities that already exist, each disciple is encouraged to seek growth opportunities that speak to them, and each is welcomed to bring suggestions to staff and to each other of new ways that we may be able to grow in our discipleship. An important part of the discipleship process at BHUMC is our encouragement and support for each person to seek out opportunities to grow in their spiritual journeys and to discover more about their own gifts, about God, and about our relationships with Christ. Such growth may lead newcomers to be part of the inviting and welcoming process, sharing their experience, and encouraging future newcomers to explore their faith through our church.

Send / Service

Matthew 9:35 tells us "*The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.*" As a church community committed to raising Disciples of Christ, we are called to **send** workers into the field. In addition to Welcoming new (and old)

disciples and encouraging them to Grow, BHUMC also seeks to encourage disciples to become an active part of the body of Christ. We already offer many opportunities to serve in our church and in our community (see Appendix for a list) but we also encourage growth in discipleship through seeking new opportunities both within the bounds of the congregation and out in the surrounding community and the world.

As a disciple continues the journey toward a deeper relationship with Christ, they will begin to discern certain gifts that the Lord has given them. Those gifts may range from a gift of administration, which a disciple might use in organizing events in the community; to the gift of evangelism, that a disciple would employ in sharing the love of God with people they meet. There are many other gifts which God bestows that enable us to share God's love with the world.

Opportunities for service provide ways for us to further explore and share the gifts God has bestowed on each person, to share in the Gospel of Christ by living it out in service to others and by seeking to be in ministry in a wide variety of ways.

BHUMC encourages and supports all disciples to share their faith experience, their gifts and their service within and beyond the walls of our church, reaching into the local community and the wider world as part of their discipleship.

Your Journey

As we prepare to sharpen our focus on discipleship, each of us should consider our own answers to the following questions which can help us each engage our own discipleship path review and revitalization.

- 1. Why do you attend or connect with a church?** - Perhaps the easiest question to consider, but one which can also greatly help in considering discipleship, is to consider why you attend or in some way connect with church in general, and the specific church you have chosen to attend. For most people, there is an underlying connection

to, or desire to explore Christianity and their relationship to the faith. Beyond that, reasons vary from “It is in the neighborhood” and “It is where my friends attend, and they invited me” to “I have been a life-long member of denomination X” and “I resonate deeply with the mission work of this church”. Your response should help you begin to consider where on the Discipleship Spiral you would place yourself.

2. Is your walk with Jesus an organizing principle of your life? – This question may cause you to look much more deeply into your feelings about your faith life, your commitment to living out the principles taught by Jesus, and your place along the spiral.

3. How enriching to your life is your faith experience and your discipleship? Is it something you would like to see grow?

4. How important are the ministries of the church to your faith and what are your levels of involvement in those ministries? This applies to both those within and those outside the walls of the building.

5. What do you sense is lacking, or would be helpful to your personal discipleship process?

Conclusion

We hope that this “Plan” is something that helps each person to enter the process of considering and understanding their unique Discipleship Path, as well as providing tools for each person’s journey along the Discipleship Spiral. We recognize that each person’s journey is unique to their current context and history, but in this Plan we have sought to provide the tools to help anyone engage and grow. It is our prayer and hope that each of us will continue to grow in our discipleship through all of our days as we continue to grow in our relationships with Christ.

APPENDIX A:

Opportunities for Discipleship Involvement and Growth at BHUMC

WORSHIP	
Weekly Services at 9:00 & 10:30	New Member Conversations
Child Care	Prayer Ministry
Music Program – Choirs, Voices of Hope, Joyful Voices	Seeker Sisters in Christ
	Welcome Group

YOUTH PROGRAMS	
Youth Group – Grades 6-12	Sunday School for K-12
Pre-School	Children’s Choir

COMMUNITY	
Seasonal – Easter Egg Hunt, Trunk-or-Treat (Halloween)	Community Luncheons & dinners
	Alcoholics Anonymous
CAPTAIN	Lord’s Acre Fair
Scouts – Boys and Girls	Winter Sports Sale
Burnt Hills Women’s Association	Crop Walk
Food Pantry	Pre-School

OUTREACH	
Pub Theology	RISSE
Soup Kitchen	Volunteers in Mission
United Methodist Relief	

MEMBER SUPPORT	
Caregiver Support	United Methodist Women’s Group
United Methodist Men’s Group	Parish Nurses
Prayer Chain	Visitation Group
Camping Program	Covenant Groups
Spiritual Formation	Vacation Bible School
Bible/Book Studies	